

Disability Etiquette

Interacting With Persons With Disabilities

Judicial Council of California • Administrative Office of the Courts

Access and Fairness Advisory Committee

www.courtinfo.ca.gov/programs/access

General Etiquette

People with disabilities prefer that you focus on their abilities, not their disabilities. The person should always be stressed first. The term *handicapped* should be avoided. The preferred usage is *people with disabilities* or *persons with disabilities*. The term *disabled people* is acceptable, but this term still defines people as disabled first and people second.

Language is powerful, but attitudes and behaviors are the most difficult barriers for people with disabilities to overcome.

Be Yourself

Treat people with disabilities with the same respect and consideration that you have for everyone else.



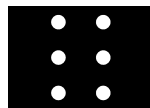
Treat the person as an individual, not as a disability. Don't assume that "disability" is all that person can talk about or is interested in. Find a topic of small talk the way you would with anyone. Use a normal voice when extending a verbal welcome. Do not raise your voice unless requested. As in any new situation, everyone will be more comfortable if you relax.

Helping

Do not automatically give assistance. Ask first if the person wants help. Follow the person's cues, and ask if you are not sure. Assistance with doors, as long as you are clear of the path, is usually very much appreciated. If your offer of assistance is accepted, listen or ask for instructions. Don't be offended if someone refuses your offer. It is his or her choice to be as independent as possible.

Communication

People are considered to have communication disabilities when their ability to receive, send, or process information is reduced.



Talk directly to the person, not to an aide or interpreter. It is important to make eye contact. If you don't understand someone, ask the person to repeat. If the person doesn't understand you

when you speak, try again. Sometimes it takes repeated attempts at listening or speaking for communication to be successful. Let the person know your communication with him or her is worthwhile to you. When appropriate, offer to make public information available in alternative formats such as Braille, audio tape, or large print.

Environments

Be sensitive about the setting. A noisy or dark environment or many people talking at the same time may make it difficult for people with vision, speech, hearing, or some other hidden disabilities to fully participate in a conversation. Be aware of clear paths of travel for people who are blind or use wheelchairs or other mobility aids. Be aware that a person with chemical sensitivity may have a reaction to smoke, perfume, or other toxins in the environment.



Socializing

Do not leave persons with disabilities out of a conversation or activity because you feel uncomfortable or fear that they will feel uncomfortable. Include them as you would anyone else. They know what they can do and what they want to do. Let it be their decision whether or not to participate.

Touching

You may gently touch people with disabilities to get their attention. Touch them when appropriate, such as when shaking hands in greeting or if assistance is requested. If you meet people with AIDS, shake their hands as you would anyone else's. You can't get AIDS by touching.

Do not touch someone's cane, wheelchair, or other assistive device. It is a part of that person's personal space. If you are interested in a demonstration of someone's electronic aid, ask the person. Do not try to use such equipment unless you are invited to do so. Guide dogs and other service animals are working animals. Do not pet or touch them without specific permission.

Persons With Specific Disabilities

Persons With Mobility Disabilities

A person in a wheelchair is a "wheelchair user" or "uses a wheelchair." When having an extended conversation with someone in a wheelchair or scooter, try sitting or crouching down to his or her approximate height. It's okay to invite a person in a wheelchair to "go for a walk." Never touch or lean on a person's wheelchair unless you have permission—it's that person's private space. Give a push only when asked. Enable people who use crutches, canes, walkers, or wheelchairs to keep their mobility aids within reach, unless requested otherwise. Be aware of what is and is not accessible to people who use mobility aids such as wheelchairs and walkers.

People who use wheelchairs may have a variety of different disabilities. Some have use of their arms and some don't. When you meet someone, extend your hand to shake if that is what you normally do. A person who cannot shake your hand will let you know, but he or she will appreciate being treated in a normal way.

Persons With Speech Disabilities

Listen patiently and carefully. Address persons with speech disabilities as you would any other person in the same situation. Don't complete



sentences for a person with a speech disability unless he or she specifically asks you for help. Don't pretend you understand what he or she says just to be polite. Go to a quiet room if necessary. Don't let able-bodied people interrupt a person with a speech disability just because they talk louder. Ask the person to repeat if you don't understand. Ask the person to say something a different way if you're not sure what he or she is saying.

Keep good eye contact. If a person with a speech disability is using a voicer, speak to and keep eye contact with the person, not the voicer. If he or she uses an amplifier or another device, don't touch it, as that is part of his or her personal space.

Persons With Specific Disabilities

Deaf and Hard of Hearing

If you need to attract the attention of a person who is deaf or hard of hearing, touch him or her lightly on the shoulder or arm. When you talk to people who are deaf or hard of hearing, talk directly to them, not to the interpreter, and face them so they can see your lips. Slow your rate of speech, speak your words clearly, and increase your volume, if requested. Shouting is often counterproductive.



Not all people who are deaf or hard of hearing can read lips. For those people, other forms of communication may be necessary. Some people who are deaf or hard of hearing may offer to write messages back and forth. For some, American Sign Language (ASL) is their first language, and they may require a sign language interpreter to understand proceedings or participate in a conversation.

Persons With Visual Disabilities

Be descriptive. Describe goings-on and surroundings, especially obstacles, to a blind person. You may have to help orient people with visual disabilities and let them know what's coming up. Be the assistant, not the director. If you are asked for assistance, let a blind person hold your arm as a guide. If they are walking, tell them if they have to step up or step down; let them know if the door is to their right or left; and warn them of possible hazards.



You don't have to speak loudly to people with visual disabilities. Most of them can hear just fine. Offer to read written information for a person with a visual disability when appropriate. It's okay to ask blind people if they "see what you mean." If you are meeting a blind person, identify yourself. If you have met before, remind the person of the context because he or she won't have the visual cues to jog the memory.

Persons With Learning Disabilities

Don't assume the person is not listening just because you are not getting any verbal or visual feedback. Ask them whether they understand or agree. Don't assume you have to explain everything to people with learning disabilities. They do not necessarily have a problem with general comprehension. Offer to read written material aloud when necessary.

Persons With Hidden Disabilities

Not all disabilities are apparent. A person may have trouble following a conversation, may not respond when you call or wave, or may say or do something that seems inappropriate. The person may have a hidden disability such as poor vision, a seizure disorder, a hearing loss, a learning disability, a brain injury, a mental disability, or a health condition. These are just a few of the many different types of hidden disabilities. Don't make assumptions about the person or the disability. Be open-minded.



Administrative Office of the Courts
455 Golden Gate Avenue
San Francisco, California 94102-3660
415-865-4200

The Access and Fairness Advisory Committee's reports and other publications are available on the committee's home page:
www.courtinfo.ca.gov/programs/access

Special thanks to the **Citizens Advisory Commission on Disabilities of the City of Long Beach** for its permission to reproduce information contained in its pamphlet.

This pamphlet is the creation and responsibility of the Access and Fairness Advisory Committee and not the Judicial Council of California.